

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

4/5/2/24

"ARTS AND AFRICA"

No. 30

(4R 53 S030P)

SIGNATURE TUNE

MAHONEY: Well, let me tell you what's happening today back to front, we'll be finishing with news of preparations for next year's Negro Arts Festival in Lagos that have taken place in the Gambia. And any excuse is a good excuse for some music from home.

GAMBIAN MUSIC

But, as I said, we're keeping news from the Gambia for the end of the programme.

We're beginning today in Nigeria,...not anywhere in Nigeria but in Benin,...and not anywhere in Benin but in one particular street. Michael Wooldridge, you've just come back from a visit to Nigeria so could you tell me, what's so special about this street?

MICHAEL WOOLDRIDGE:

Well Benin is a city with a history that can be traced back for a thousand years. It always had a well organised government and possessed a unique culture, it was a small kingdom but it had very great influence. At the height of its fortunes Benin was an artistic centre famed for its ivory work, for its woodcarvings and for its drum-making, and particularly for its brass and bronze casting. The achievements of these Benin people have been acclaimed by experts throughout the world.

Now each of these crafts has one particular street in which it is practised and the street for brass and bronze work is a street called Igun Street. As you walk along this street which is right in the middle of the town, all along it is lined by little houses with red hot fires on the doorsteps and you see little groups of families still these days working the brass and bronze in the same way as they have done for centuries.

MAHONEY: So how long has this been going on?

WOOLDRIDGE: Well people seem to have been working in this street for six centuries. The street has a sort of leader, he is a man called Chief Ineh and in fact, I asked him about this.

CHIEF INEH: Since we have beginning to work in this street is about from the thirteenth century.

WOOLDRIDGE: From the thirteenth century.

CHIEF INEH: We are working it ourselves and marketing it.

WOOLDRIDGE: And is it the same families working here now? Has it been handed from father to son?

CHIEF INEH: Oh yes. It is an inherited work. My father did it and my grandfather did it too and just the same with all my relatives.

WOOLDRIDGE: And how many people are there working in the street altogether?

CHIEF INEH: Well, both men and their people there is one thousand.

WOOLDRIDGE: A thousand of you altogether.

MAHONEY: Who exactly is this gentleman, this Chief?

WOOLDRIDGE: Well he is the leader of the street in effect. The leader of the bronze workers. It is a title that is a hereditary one, it was originally given by the Oba or ruler of Benin. The title has been within his own family now for many generations. He keeps within his house many old pieces - beautiful old heads and masks. I heard about one particular piece he had and I asked him about it

Now you still have in your house some very old pieces of brass work. Which is the oldest?

CHIEF INEH: Well not all that much but I remember that I have one mask used to honour his wife in the Palace which was made about 1550.

WOOLDRIDGE: 1550, is it safe to keep it in your house.

CHIEF INEH: Yes,...

WOOLDRIDGE: It remains in the family it has been handed down from person to person.

MAHONEY: Do you think, Mike that this business of handing down craft, I mean for instance in one or two places in West Africa, Sierra Leone for example, a lot of the traders - the people who used to be the small shopkeepers had their sons graduating as lawyers and doctors and they never went back to the trades so that sort of trade is dying down. Do you think his children will follow this?

WOOLDRIDGE: Everybody I spoke to, they had certainly taught their own sons, nephews how to carry on the craft. They taught them from a very early age, six or seven before they were going to school. It is something they are very proud to keep up, it is perhaps not quite the same as a trade it is a craft, something which even if they go off to the city they are still very proud that they are able to cast bronzes. They are doing rather different work nowadays, of course, the original work was in fact much more ceremonial pieces which were commissioned by the Oba, the ruler. Nowadays the work takes many more varied forms not just heads and masks but anything that anybody commissions. But one would imagine that with this interest that there still is among the people in the street that it will in fact keep going for many generations.

MAHONEY: Yes, it reminds me very much of the silversmith in Gambia. Well Mike Wooldridge thanks very much for coming along.

GAMBIAN MUSIC

Also sitting opposite me is Swaebou Conateh, Head of Broadcasting in the Gambia. Swaebou it is good to see you. Especially as I've been hearing about the arts festival back home and I am hoping that you can fill me in with some of the details. It was connected with the forthcoming Lagos festival. Am I right.

SWAEBOU CONATEH:

Yes, it is connected with that. Now this festival which is taking place in Lagos there has been a lot of preparation going on at home, in the Gambia, and already we had a festival, the First National Cultural Festival in the early part of this year.

MAHONEY: What sort of people took part in this festival?

CONATEH: The whole country participated in the festival for the first time and this was very significant and it showed to the members of the National Cultural Committee, I am one of the members, that our culture is definitely rich and there is a lot of hidden talent which has to be fully exploited.

MAHONEY: Absolutely, there is no doubt about that. Now, were there people from just Banjul or were there people from Kombo or from Georgetown.

CONATEH: No it was done by divisions so that you found all the administrative divisions took part in the festival.

MAHONEY: That's very good because that means you are finding wealth from the countryside itself. Was it a modern-type festival by modern I mean did you have singers who sang pop songs; or did you have people like The Super Eagles playing or were there traditional musicians?

CONATEH: We were very careful about this because we know our actual culture is the traditional culture and a lot of scope was given to people from the provincial areas and those in Banjul too, to take part. The sort of people who emphasised the traditional sort of culture whether it is in music or in dance or in some other activity like....

MAHONEY: Dramas?

CONATEH: No there was no drama but there was a musical evening but I was thinking of things like making traditional handicrafts and arts.

MAHONEY: It was perhaps getting it sorted out for next year. Seeing the wealth of the country.

CONATEH: Yes, this is true. In fact, the organisers saw it as an experiment and there'll be another one next year which will also be staged for the Lagos Festival and the enthusiasm shown for it can be seen from the fact that the first day the festival was organised so many people came to see it that it was not possible to organise it.

MAHONEY: But tell me don't you think that it is a bit difficult for the Gambia in comparison with say Zaire or Kenya or Nigeria in terms of competition because the economy isn't as rich as these countries? So the emphasis on culture would be very limited.

CONATEH: This is officially the case actually because you find that the Gambia unlike the richer bigger countries had to work against the handicaps, since it became independent, of its limited resources and because of that the government did not pay so much attention to the development of arts and culture. But as was said one time by my President: "the Gambian culture is so rich that you find that it would not die under colonialism" the proof of this for us is when we held the first festival.

MAHONEY: Did you discover a lot of new talents the people who did things which you hadn't expected, that wasn't there in the Gambia or was it what was expected, in fact?

CONATEH: I wouldn't say new talent was discovered because you find that the people who practise these things back home have been doing it most of their life and for them it is a way of living. And these were the sort of people who were brought together for the first time.

MAHONEY: Now what is in the future for the festival next year. Are you hoping that this will be a springboard for national dance and cultural troupe?

CONATEH: Yes, in fact the National Cultural Festival Committee is working on plans to set up a Musical Ensemble and also a Dance troupe.

MAHONEY: What about drama? I am interested because I would love to come back and do something...

CONATEH: Drama is developing, you know our most prolific writer as far as drama is concerned is Mr Roberts who is the Chief Education Officer but apart from that you find it is the local language dramatic groups which have actually been coming to the fore and this was shown much more clearly quite recently when there was another occasion for dramatic competitions during the week. You find that there was quite a lot of dramatic competition and in fact the group which won first prize did not come from Banjul but from Serrekunda.

MAHONEY: Very, very good. Swaebou thank you very much for coming along and have a nice trip here.

CONATEH: Thank you. (GAMBIAN MUSIC)

MAHONEY: Here's a bit of Gambian music to bring the programme to an end for today, but I'll be back next week so join me then for another programme of 'Arts and Africa'.

(GAMBIAN MUSIC)